



Department of Justice

United States Attorney Leura G. Canary
Middle District of Alabama

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www.usdoj.gov/usao/alm

CONTACT: Retta Goss
Telephone (334) 223-7280
Fax (334) 223-7560

U.S. ATTORNEY LEAVES LASTING LEGACY IN THE PROSECUTION OF INTERNET CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA— When United States Attorney Leura G. Canary resigns her post this Friday, she will leave behind a legacy of passionate advocacy on behalf of victimized children, the Office of the United States Attorney for the Middle District of Alabama announced today. During her tenure of nearly ten years in office and thanks largely to her efforts, federal prosecutions of child pornography, online child enticement, and other internet-based crimes against children have risen dramatically, both within the district and across the nation.

"Ground-Breaking" Work

From 2005 to 2009, Ms. Canary chaired the United States Attorney General's Advisory Committee Working Group on Child Exploitation. In that role, she spearheaded the creation and development of Project Safe Childhood (PSC), a nationwide Department of Justice initiative that aims to combat the growing epidemic of child sexual exploitation and abuse on the internet through increased federal prosecutions and public awareness.

As the U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Alabama, Ms. Canary also coordinated the successful implementation of the PSC initiative locally. She established a task force of dedicated prosecutors, investigators, and child advocates, secured cutting-edge training and federal grant money for local agencies, and aggressively pursued a wide spectrum of cases. She also spoke often in public on the subject of child exploitation and was regularly consulted by the Office of Legislative Affairs and the Office of Deputy Attorney General in Washington, D.C. concerning proposed legislation.

Andrew G. Oosterbaan, Chief of the Justice Department's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS), called Ms. Canary's work on the PSC initiative "ground-breaking." "Leura answered the call on behalf of children like no other," he said.

Measurable Success

This month marks the five-year anniversary of PSC, and the results of the initiative are encouraging. According to Justice Department statistics, the number of child exploitation cases prosecuted by U.S. Attorney's Offices has increased by more than 40% since 2006. In the Middle District of Alabama, that number is over 2,000%, as the Office has gone from just three cases before the PSC initiative began to nearly 70 cases over the past five years. In that time, more than 50 offenders have been convicted, nine of them after a jury trial.

Much of the Office's success in the prosecution of these cases is due to the combined efforts of its federal, state, and local law enforcement partners. In cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement - Homeland Security Investigations, the Alabama Bureau of Investigation, and other member agencies of the Alabama Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force, the U.S. Attorney's Office has prosecuted a number of significant online crimes against children cases in recent years.

In 2008, for example, the U.S. Attorney's Office successfully prosecuted the nation's first "anti-grooming" case under Title 18, United States Code, Section 2252A(a)(6) - a law enacted as part of the federal Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 that specifically targets the use of child pornography to break down a child's defenses to sexual abuse by an adult. After a week-long trial, a jury found Clanton resident, Jerry Alan Penton, 37, guilty of showing child pornography to an eight-year-old girl in order to groom her for sex. Against Penton's challenge, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals upheld his conviction and resultant 40-year prison sentence.

In 2009, the U.S. Attorney's Office worked in tandem with federal prosecutors in the Northern District of Alabama to prosecute one of the country's first reported cases of internet "sextortion." Twenty-four year old Auburn resident, Jonathan Wryn Vance, repeatedly used online social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and Yahoo to threaten and extort more than 40 minor females and young women located throughout Alabama and elsewhere. His threats led some of the victims to send sexually explicit images of themselves in vain hopes of satisfying his demands. Vance ultimately pled guilty and received 18 years in prison, followed by a life term of supervised release.

In 2010, the U.S. Attorney's Office successfully prosecuted convicted child sex offender, William Joe Mitchell, for transporting a minor across state lines for illicit sex. Mitchell, 49, was on probation in Florida for sexual battery of a minor when he began engaging in explicit internet chats with a 15-year-old Florida resident. Pretending to be a young man half his age, Mitchell eventually enticed the victim to come out to his car in the middle of the night, where he kidnapped her, brought her to Andalusia, Alabama, and raped her. Mitchell pled guilty to the federal indictment and was sentenced to 30 years in prison and a life term of supervised release.

Later that same year, the U.S. Attorney's Office worked closely with the Montgomery Police Department, the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, and the Elmore County District Attorney's Office to secure a guilty plea and conviction for Montgomery resident, James William Brunson, 32. Brunson was accused of molesting several minors, including a five-year-old girl, when he admitted to investigators that he had child pornography on his computer. Under a joint resolution of the case, Brunson pled guilty to knowingly receiving child pornography and accepted a 15-year federal prison term, along with two concurrent 20-year state prison terms for the molestation. His sentence also included a life term of supervised release.

The long federal prison sentences handed down in these cases are not aberrations. Over the past five years, 48 offenders have been sentenced in the Middle District of Alabama under the Project Safe Childhood initiative. They have received a total of 9,321 months of incarceration,

or roughly 16 years in prison on average. Twenty-eight of the offenders received supervised release for life upon completion of their prison terms. According to statistics compiled by the United States Sentencing Commission, these figures chart much higher than the national average.

An "Indelible Positive Influence"

It is little wonder, then, that Ms. Canary's contributions to the cause have garnered admiration and respect from all corners of the local law enforcement community. The head of the FBI's operations in Montgomery called his agency's relationship with the U.S. Attorney's Office "nothing less than outstanding." "Ms. Canary has been a great partner and supporter of FBI investigations," said Lewis M. Chapman, Special Agent in Charge, Mobile Office. "She will be missed greatly."

Col. Hugh B. McCall, Director of the Alabama Department of Public Safety, echoed that sentiment: "We at the Department of Public Safety have come to value Ms. Canary's tremendous support in combating the sexual exploitation of Alabama's children," he said. "Working closely with the Alabama Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crimes Against Children team, Ms. Canary has prosecuted dozens of online predators, shutting them down and putting them behind bars. We applaud her dedication to law enforcement and wish her all the best as she begins this new chapter."

Montgomery Police Chief Kevin J. Murphy thanked Ms. Canary for her leadership and vision: "Throughout her tenure as the United States Attorney, Ms. Canary has ensured that the Montgomery Police Department has received the tools and resources to fight crimes of child sexual exploitation. We are forever grateful for her contribution in assisting local law enforcement in combating child predators and bringing them to justice."

Raymond R. Parmer Jr., Special Agent-in-Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in New Orleans, also praised Ms. Canary for her "tireless" work in the area of child exploitation. "Not only are we indebted to her for taking predators off the streets where our children play," Parmer said, "we are equally grateful for the indelible positive influence she's had on the overall justice process."

"An Enduring Legacy"

Although great strides have been made, much work is left to be done. As federal child exploitation prosecutions have increased, so, too, have the number of reported offenses. From 2004 to 2008, for instance, the number of child prostitution cases being reported to ICAC task forces across the country rose more than 900 percent. In 2009, the United Nations estimated that some 750,000 sexual predators are actively attempting to contact children over the internet for the purpose of sexually exploiting them. This year, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported receiving over 3,300 cybertip reports during the first week of May alone. "Tragically," Attorney General Eric Holder recently remarked to attendees of the first-ever National Strategy Conference on Combating Child Exploitation, "the only place we've seen a decrease is in the age of the victims."

Nevertheless, as the online threat to children continues to grow and evolve, the PSC

initiative Ms. Canary worked so hard to establish lives on. In fact, it is being expanded. Last August, the Justice Department released the National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, a comprehensive plan to both broaden and refine the nationwide response to these crimes. Under the National Strategy, PSC now also encompasses violations of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act, as well as all federal offenses involving the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, regardless of whether or not they involved the internet. Already, the United States Marshals Service and ICAC task forces have begun aggressively pursuing the 500 most dangerous, non-compliant sex offenders, whose failure to register puts thousands of innocent children at risk, and across the nation more investigators and prosecutors are being trained to handle complex cases involving human trafficking and international child sex tourism.

Looking back on Ms. Canary's term in office, CEOS Chief Oosterbaan called her unwavering dedication to the PSC initiative "instrumental." "Leura leaves an enduring legacy of child protection at the Department of Justice," he said. For all that she has done to help protect and defend our children, the U.S. Attorney's Office is honored by the exemplary service of Ms. Canary and remains committed to furthering the tremendous work she has begun in the Middle District of Alabama. For more information about Project Safe Childhood, please visit www.projectsafechildhood.gov/